

Problems of intercultural communication in FL learning

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of intercultural competence in the process of learning and teaching a foreign language. Learning a foreign language is viewed from a more complex perspective, rather than simply learning its vocabulary or grammar, or the four skills of learning a language (reading, listening, speaking and writing). While they are highly important when learning a foreign language, there is still more. What is also expected from students is to be better communicators in today's globalized world, i.e. a world of people from different cultures and backgrounds living together in a community. The interaction or communication between the members of this community does not mean that we should only speak the same language, but we should learn more about the culture, the customs, the communication behavior and many other characteristics of the people we communicate with. As a result, intercultural competence has become important among scholars who discuss or analyze foreign language learning and intercultural learning.

Keywords: *FL learning, intercultural communication, prejudice, stereotypes, knowledge*

The topic of intercultural communication has been extensively discussed in recent years. It has been regarded as highly important in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language because the concept of foreign language learning has become broader and of a more complex nature. Learning a foreign language is considered a multi-fold process, with numerous extra-linguistic factors taken into account. Thus, learning a foreign language does not mean learning its vocabulary or grammar, or the four skills of learning a language such as reading, listening, speaking and writing. While there is considerable evidence that they are essential in learning a foreign language, there is still more.

What is also expected from students is to be better communicators in the globalized world we are living in. Today's globalized world means a world of people/s from different cultures and backgrounds "co-existing" in a

certain community. The interaction or communication between the members of this community does not solely imply that we should share the language, but we should know more about the culture, the customs, the communication behavior and many other characteristics of the people we communicate with. Consequently, intercultural competence has become very important to scholars or foreign language teachers who analyze foreign language learning and/or the intercultural learning process.

Judith Martin & Thomas Nakayama (2010) discuss an important aspect of intercultural communication, that of ethnocentrism, as a factor which prevents proper interaction between members of different cultures. They claim that ethnocentrism is “a tendency to think that our own culture is superior to other cultures. This means that we assume, subconsciously, that the way we do things is the only way” (p. 5). They also believe that “to be surprised or even taken aback by unfamiliar customs is not unexpected; however, a refusal to expand your cultural horizons or to acknowledge the legitimacy of cultural practices different from your own can lead to intergroup misunderstandings and conflict” (p. 5).

It has to be underlined that intercultural communication “has been occurring for thousands of years” (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2013), but in the last decades it has become more thoroughly elaborated. Samovar et al. illustrate the interconnectedness of today’s world by the examples of the EU economic crisis affecting world financial markets, Hollywood and foreign markets, international tourism, job competition, and foreign students. Moreover, information technology has increased intercultural communication opportunities, with social networks becoming increasingly popular. The possibilities to “explore” the new or the unfamiliar have contributed to the emergence of a number of challenges to be solved.

Some of the main problems arising from multicultural contact are stereotypes and prejudice. Richard Brislin (2000) defines stereotypes as “generalizations about people based on the names of groups in which the people are real or imagined members” (p. 195), which often results from “a lack of familiarity or similarity” (Samovar et al., 2013, p. 231). On the other hand, while Brislin (2000) defines prejudice as people’s feelings toward other cultural groups, “hostility toward others is an integral part of prejudice” (Samovar et al., 2013, p. 234). Stereotypes, as categories about people, are generally regarded as “shortcuts to thinking” (Brislin, 2000, p. 199).

Prejudice, being a universal phenomenon, results in dividing people into what Brislin (2000) calls “in-groups” and “out-groups” (p. 209). In-groups

refers to individuals you have positive feelings about while out-groups refers to individuals you have negative feelings about and try to keep at a distance. The negative feelings about out-groups may range from “intense racism” (p. 214), believing that all the members of the out-groups are inferior, to “the familiar and unfamiliar” (p. 222), that is to say having prior information about something or not.

He also provides various intervention strategies to both stereotypes and prejudice, including the “intimate contact” (p. 229) strategy, which refers to the sharing of personal information. Similarly, Samovar et al. (2013) recommend the strategy of “personal contact and education” (p. 237). This means that the great number of positive contacts between in-groups and out-groups decreases the level of prejudice between these groups.

Prejudice may also emerge due to differences between societies showing individualism and collectivism. According to Samovar et al. (2013), “cultures classified as individualistic value the individual over the group, whereas for collective cultures the emphasis is on the needs and goals of the group rather than the self” (p. 79). Another difference is that between egalitarian and hierarchical societies. In egalitarian societies “a person’s status is usually acquired through individual effort, while in hierarchical societies, status is normally acquired by birth, appointment, or age” (Samovar et al., 2003, p. 314).

The complexity of cultural differences is obvious as culture comprises a number of components such as “religion, history, values, social organizations and language” (Samovar et al., 2013, p. 57). Thus, a culture’s history affects the way the world is perceived and religion, perception and behavior are inextricably intertwined. Moreover, culture does not begin with us but it is transmitted from generation to generation and above all it is likely to change. For example, although family is regarded as one of the most universal features of humanity, it has been undergoing changes in the way people view family relations. Moreover, as Edward T. Hall (1976, p. 91) claims, “no culture exists exclusively at one end of the scale”. Attitudes to time may also differ from culture to culture. This has been analyzed by Hall (1991), who has made the distinction between monochronic and polychronic organization of time. He distinguishes between doing one thing at a time (Northern Europe for example) and involvement in several things at once (the Mediterranean area for example), with both having strengths and weaknesses.

Furthermore, people’s identity is not usually considered a single unit but it “actually consists of multiple identities acting in concert” (Samovar et. al., 2013, p. 217). These identities include racial identity, ethnic identity,

gender identity, national identity, regional identity, organizational identity, personal identity, cyber and fantasy identity. All these identities “are largely a product of group membership” (Samovar et al., 2013, p. 224).

Due to the complexity of culture, identities and communication, people often find themselves in the middle of problem situations while interacting with other people, with whom they may not share the language, background, religion, history, skin color, attitudes toward moral principles, way of living, or tradition. Accepting the variety of peoples, cultures, and histories existing on our planet is a first essential step. Then, it is important to better know your own culture and the way it interacts with others.

It is commonly believed that language learners need “to be aware of their own identities and those of the interlocutors” (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002, p. 7). Both Ragnhild Lund (2008) and Byram et al. (2002) agree that in addition to exchanging information, people also need to take into consideration the social or cultural identities of their interlocutors. As a result, learners have been generally regarded as intercultural speakers or mediators. Byram et al. (2002) define intercultural competence as the “ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality” (p. 10). Moreover, it is necessary for learners to relate their culture to other cultures and be prepared for this intercultural interaction on the basis of respect for others. As a result, linguistic and intercultural competence should be regarded as complementary.

But is it possible to be a perfect “expert” in a culture? If we answered yes, it would mean that we are aware of all changes occurring in a culture and the different cultures where a language is used. Moreover, even the cultural identity of a single person is in a process of constant change as people gain new experience, become part of different social groups, and establish new connections.

According to Byram et al. (2002) intercultural competence consists of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Knowledge is not limited to just knowledge of a certain culture but of “how social groups and identities function” (Byram et al., 2002, p. 12). In addition to knowledge, intercultural attitudes are essential to intercultural competence. Attitudes include “a willingness to relativize one’s own values, beliefs and behaviours” (Byram et al., 2002, p. 12). Another important component of intercultural competence is skills, which includes skills of comparison, interpreting and relating. A similar approach is followed by Lund (2008) who does not limit intercultural competence to knowledge and respect for

other cultures but it is important to put this knowledge into use in a situation of intercultural communication.

Information about a country is not necessarily gathered in the country itself as nowadays there is a variety of sources such as the internet and tourist brochures. Therefore, it is not necessary for teachers to be “encyclopedias” of countries but they need to teach their learners how to “respond to others and others’ views of themselves” (Byram et al., 2002, p. 15). Even a native speaker cannot know all the culture of his country because as Byram et al. (2002) put it, “there are many cultures within a country” and “cultural learning goes on throughout life” (p. 17).

However, let us not forget that teachers are members of an official institution, such as the school, and they have to use a certain syllabus and textbook. Byram et al. (2002) do not go into the issue of whether textbooks comprise the intercultural perspective. Even if a textbook does not include the intercultural perspective, Byram et al. (2002) still find space for intercultural teaching. For example, this can be achieved by explaining a certain topic from different perspectives, learners can be encouraged to ask further questions, and they can also challenge stereotypes or prejudice that can be identified in exercises. It is also suggested that learners can be encouraged to use authentic materials which challenge the views expressed by the textbook. Special attention must be paid to the avoidance of stereotypes and prejudice, as two big obstacles to effective intercultural communication. It is important to underline that intercultural speakers should be aware of their own values and cultural backgrounds, and it is essential for them to have a critical awareness of their own values as well as of the values of others.

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